

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE®



2011-2012

Letters About Literature

Awards Ceremony

June 1, 2012

11:00am-12:00pm

Columbia, South Carolina



Introductions	Dr. Curtis. R. Rogers, Coordinator, SC Center for the Book
Welcome	Ms. Debbie Yoho, President, SC State Library Foundation
Awards	Each student winner will be introduced by a South Carolina Letters About Literature judge. Winning students will read their letter and receive their award. Photos will be taken when each student receives their award and group photos will be taken at the end of the program.
Closing Remarks & Special Presentation	Dr. Curtis R. Rogers

Level One: Grades 4 – 6

First Place	Mikayla Zwerdling, Charles Townes Center at Sterling School, Greenville
Second Place	Shelby Higgenbottom, Hammond Hill Elementary School, North Augusta
Third Place	Kiara Johnson, McDonald Elementary School, Georgetown

Level Two: Grades 7 – 8

First Place	Gina Joerger, Charles Townes Center at Sterling School, Greenville
Second Place	Katherine Woo, Riverside Middle School, Greer
Third Place	Kathryn Simmons, Charles Townes Center at Sterling School, Greenville

Level Three: Grades 9 – 12

First Place	Kristyn Robinson, Individual Submission, Greer
Second Place	Kelly Ellis, Individual Submission, Easley
Third Place	Madeline Giess, Dreher High School, Columbia

Mikayla Zwerdling
733 Bennett St.
Greenville, SC 29609

Dear Mr. Dan Brown,

Over the years, books I have read were fantastic and certainly enjoyable, but lacked the intellectual stimulus I so desperately wanted. Your novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, offered those nuggets of information that not only kept the plot going, but more importantly, made me spend long periods of time trying to decide if those facts were actually real. I was intrigued, amazed, and feverishly curious to figure out the veracity of these mysterious, underground organizations and secrets seen by almost nobody and yet were always in plain and obvious sight.

It was a simple question from my mother that introduced me to your writings, "Mikayla, what book are you planning to read for your book review?" Because I didn't have any in mind, and knowing I love intellectual challenges as well as mysteries, she suggested *The Da Vinci Code*. Just reading the synopsis on the back immediately caught my attention and I was ready for the adventure to begin.

My mother told me that although the book contains some adult content, I would probably understand it. Back into the living room I found a comfortable place on the couch, turned the first page and instantly delved into your book. Daylight turned to dusk when my mom told me it was time for dinner. I had been there, oblivious to everything around me, for hours on end, reading *The Da Vinci Code*.

Because of the details and descriptions, I felt as if I was right beside Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu trying to figure out who murdered her grandfather, Jacques Saunière. I wanted to jump in as Fache's right hand man, or one of Sir Teabing's servants. I was able to truly feel the sensation of being in the action rather than an observer alongside the "omniscient narrator in the sky".

The Da Vinci Code was an incredible adventure to read, and more than any other book, it changed my perspective of the world. I now see things more than just the simple objects or pictures or even colors they may be. I look deeper and wonder if maybe they were included to convey a message.

Having spent a month in Italy a few years ago, I now think about all of the places visited, the symbols scattered across seemingly everything and everywhere, and the messages I missed, not realizing the stories they had to tell me. Your book opened a whole new universe of treasure hunting for me as I now seek to understand the meanings hidden in plain sight.

Along with my new found sense of being a detective, I am also much more interested in the connections between the past and the present. The fact that people, events, and even objects from so long ago can still have a life-changing effect on what happens today is amazing. As I continue through my education, history lessons are no longer dry and boring. I am eager to figure out those connections and enjoy imagining the people who set the stage so that today we are still linked.

Thank you for everything,


Mikayla Zwerdling

Shelby J. Higgenbottom
Teacher: Ms. Mock
Hammond Hill Elementary School
901 West Woodlawn Avenue
North Augusta, SC, 29841

Dear Rachel Renee Russell,

People say a picture is worth a thousand words. I say one of your books, Dork Diaries, is worth a thousand happy moments. I'm not judging a book by its cover, but there is something about your books that puts a smile on my face whenever I glance at your peculiar, but hilarious books.

Your books yell at me, "I'm the book you want! I have everything!" Your writings are astonishing! They build an imagination in my head that I have never experienced before. I remember a specific scene where Nikki was doing her "happy/Snoopy dance" and that part made me laugh so hard I almost spit out my gum! Every side-splitting scene of that book series takes me to a whole new world.

Something that flabbergasts me is that Nikki Maxwell's friends, Chloe and Zoey, are similar to my friends, Chloe and Abby. They are identical to my friends because they are always making me do outrageous shenanigans! But just like Nikki, I love them anyway.

This book made a gigantic impact on my life. Nikki was like my older sister guiding me through the drama of middle and high school. I only have two older brothers and Nikki led me into her world like a big sister would.

Your books are as bright as the sun, beautiful as Aphrodite, pink as Minnie Mouse's bow, purple as grapes, your books are as informational as a thesaurus. Thank you for creating such a strong book. Without it I wouldn't be the reader I am today. Once again, thank you for every single book you put in this world.

"Dorkingly" signing off,

Shelby J. Higgenbottom

Dear Mildred D. Taylor,

As I read *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, I had so many feelings. It made me feel sad, angry, surprised, and anxious. Your book is similar to my life because Cassie is close to her family like I am to mine. This book taught me to choose my friends wisely. This book also showed me that everything isn't always fair.

First, your book is similar to my life because Cassie's mama is a teacher and my mama is a teacher. My mother has taught me the importance of a good education, just like Cassie's mama. Cassie's daddy has two jobs and my daddy has two jobs. My dad is a hard worker and always takes care of the family. He provides for our family no matter what.

Secondly, your book showed that you should choose your friends wisely. In this book TJ got in trouble for choosing the wrong friends. He hung with the wrong crowd and started drinking. You should never give in to peer pressure. One time I saw a classmate bullying another student and my friend and I stood up to that person. If my friend was a bad person, he would have tried to tell me to join in. Your book taught me the importance of choosing good friends.

Finally, your book taught me that life isn't always fair. I learned that in the past black people weren't always treated fairly. You have to learn how to leave the past behind and make a better future. You have to love and respect all people no matter what color they are. Everyone have to work together to make a better world.

In conclusion, your book taught me many important lessons. I learned the importance of family, choosing my friends wisely, and working together to make a better world. I will never forget the great character in this book. This book has made me interested in reading other books by you.

Sincerely, Kiara Johnson

Gina Joerger
235 Perry Avenue
Simpsonville, SC 29681

Dear Mr. Chris Crowe,

A second grade African American boy had been paired with someone for a math game. He looks up, excited, to see who it is. His partner, a white boy, looks at him disapprovingly, and refuses to work with him because of his skin color.

"My mom said I can't be friends with a black person." He says. The African American boy looks at his partner sadly, but smiles kindly. The white boy glares in response, and starts playing the math game with another group. The African boy frowns, curls up into a tiny ball, and sits in a corner for the rest of math class. A second grade girl who had been observing the situation, looks at the sad boy worriedly, but does nothing. I am that girl.

A fourth grade girl smiles weakly at her neighborhood friend, as she makes fun of an African American girl they see at a park.

"They are so weird and scary looking!" She says, as she makes a weird face. She then turns to look at her friend and whispers,

"Remember, you can never be friends with a black person. If you do, you can't be friends with me anymore, okay?" The girl nods, not being able to have the courage to argue back. I am that girl.

A seventh grade girl laughs weakly at a racist joke her friend tells her during a field trip.

"Aww, that's mean!" She says, but does nothing for her friend to stop. Her friend then goes up to the most talkative boy in the class, and tells him the joke. He laughs, and starts to walk around to tell everybody the "hilarious racist joke", causing a chain reaction to start. The girl looks around her, and frowns inside her heart, while occasionally "laughing" with her friends. I am that girl.

I have always, ALWAYS, been that girl. That girl who just stared at the unfair situation, and did absolutely nothing to help. Thinking about it now, I sometimes wonder why I didn't speak up, why I didn't just help or stop the problem. Was I lacking the courage? Was I agreeing with the situation? And why did I even care?

I had learned about slavery and racism a few times in Social Studies and World History, and I had felt really guilty of what our ancestors had done in the past. But I could never stand up and fight, and point out to everyone that what they are doing was wrong, and is possibly hurting someone's feelings. I was scared to do so.

Living in the south, a lot of people around me are racist. They complain and make ridiculous excuses to why they don't like African Americans. To say the truth, when I grew up and became older, I started to care less and less about the cursing and jokes that were made toward the Africans. Ignoring them became a habit, and soon the thought that arguing back was useless, stuck in my mind. Every time something racist happened, the

part of me that wanted to fight back became smaller, and smaller, soon becoming nothing. I was hopeless.

Then one day, while walking through the isles of my school library, I found your book, sitting at an awkward angle on a shelf. I picked it up and read the back, and since I needed a historical fiction book for a school assignment, I shrugged my shoulders and took it to the front desk to check it out. I then went to class, where I started to read the book.

At first, I thought this book was going to be any other slavery story. But two hours later, I figured out that I was wrong.

I could not put down the book. I even ignored my closest friend when she asked me to stop reading. I read and read, absorbing each word and sentence into my brain, slowly regaining my will to fight. And by the time I finished with the story, I could feel my body overflow in determination. I then knew exactly, that what I had been doing was wrong.

I then surprised myself the next day, by snapping at my friend, for talking about a racist joke. And the next day, but telling my neighborhood friend to stop making fun of the African Americans. And the next day, and the next day, and every single day after reading your book, by explaining to everyone why we should not be racist, and that we are hurting their feelings.

And guess what Mr. Crowe? I noticed changes in the people around me. My neighbor stopped making weird faces and fun of the African Americans. My friends stopped saying racist jokes all the time, and even started to tell other people to stop.

Your book changed not only me, but everyone around me too. It brought me the courage and hope for peace, and helped me grow into the person I've always wanted to be.

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,

Gina Joerger

Katherine Woo
5 Colby Court
Greer, SC 29650

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

I believe that equality between all people is important and discrimination is not something that should get in the way of your friendship. Sometimes, friends are chosen by race and how they look. Your novel, *Milkweed*, reminds everyone that this is not the way it should be. Everyone should be treated equally no matter what race, looks, or color.

When I first moved here, most of my friends didn't mind about my dark hair or my almond-shaped eyes. Some were even jealous of me. But as I started to grow older and move up grades, things started to change. Kids around me started emphasizing my race and looks. I got called harsh names such as "squinty eyes" and "yellow." Kids also started making fun of me and giving me weird looks, avoiding me. At first, I didn't realize why they were criticizing me continuously. I thought it was just a rumor or something bad about me that was being spread. Then, as I grew older and the taunting got worse, things started slowly sinking in for me, that I was being made fun of because of my race. My friends from elementary school, whom I had grown up with, started avoiding me. I had barely any friends and was mostly alone everywhere I went. And yet, still, the discrimination was getting worse.

Soon, after a while, people started realizing that I was no different from any of them, just that I looked different. I started making friends again, this time more carefully. Now, all of my new friends were all really close to me and we were like sisters. They were all loyal, smart, and responsible. But the pain was already inflicted. I had horrible memories from when I was younger, being made fun of, tormented by cruel names. The damage was done.

StopThief was questioned and prodded wherever he went but he was still always loyal friends with Uri. That mirrors my friends and me. We may be questioned and made fun of, but we always have each other.

Your book helped me to gather some courage and still be myself. It also taught me to have hope that someday these things will stop. Inside, I know honestly that it never will, but I hope that it will get better. It already has. It is, of course, not to the extent of Jewish StopThief

who had to run away to escape getting captured and killed. Wherever I go, I see many people—some that are similar to the Jackboots in your book, some that are like my friends who smile and wave when they see me. But like always, I choose to be hopeful and positive. I think of it as a blessing that I am who I am.

With Gratitude,

Katherine
Woo

Kathryn Simmons
Charles Townes Center @
Sterling School
99 John McCarroll Way
Greenville, SC 29607

Dear John Green,

Some people go through life looking for a great perhaps, others don't. Sometimes when you find a great perhaps, you may not always realize it at the time, but it's there. Miles finds his with Alaska.

Miles, the skinny, normal kid learns to live in the moment at Alaska's side. While at the school, I learned just how much more exiting life can be when you live in the moment. You aren't always thinking about what you will do, you're doing it. In life, it can just pass you by and become an experience, or even a wish. A wish that you had done something else; a wish that you had done something, period. When you do something and make a difference, then we give this life a purpose. It makes it all worthwhile.

Then, what about this labyrinth of suffering often mentioned in your book? It seems inescapable, except by death. And one night, I was riding home, and I thought about how everyone around me was going somewhere and doing something. Sometimes, when I look at other people, they seem insignificant, but at least to *someone* they are special. I guess what I am trying to say is that no matter how insignificant someone is, everyone has a purpose.

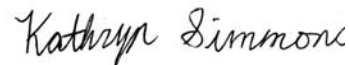
This book made me start thinking about other people. It made me realize that what *I* do and how *I* act affects those around me greatly. Alaska was always thinking about herself, and

Miles got tired of that, and frankly, so would I. When she died, no one was sure if she was thinking about herself, or others. The thing is, this labyrinth of suffering that you and I are in, is something that can be helped. I've learned something amazing from just the last few pages of *Looking for Alaska*. The fact that the only way out of the labyrinth that is our lives, and that is our suffering, is to forgive. Think about it, if everyone forgave those who have wronged them, then this world would be a much different place.

After I thought about others, I thought about the characters and how they will stick with me forever. Alaska taught me so many things that I don't think I could have learned on my own. Like the fact that we can get much more out of life, even if it is short, if we *do*. Not if we talk about doing, or thing about doing, or planning on doing it. Just doing it, and enjoying it too.

So I'm pretty sure that Miles was completely changed by this girl too. I could relate to Miles so much easier than I could to Alaska. I pretty much see my life as in the planning stage. I'm always planning to get better grades, always planning to try harder, to practice more, but I hardly ever follow through with those plans. Miles was pretty much in that stage too, before he met Alaska. Looking for something, a great perhaps, something that he knew he couldn't find on his own, so he went looking for it, and found it with Alaska. He changed drastically from the beginning to the end, and I have too.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathryn Simmons". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Kathryn Simmons

8 Stockbridge Dr

Greer, SC 29650

January 4, 2012

Dear Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell,

I've always loved autumn. The air gradually gains a new chill, hinting at future glacial winds; days grow shorter and sunsets fill with short bursts of brilliant colors as if a new sun explodes every day; the earth begins to still in preparation for the coming winter. Trees gain fiery gowns of reds and yellows that swirl around their limbs in wild dances with the wind and are shed to embrace their winter lovers. The whole world changes to greet the new season.

Change is made beautiful and attractive by nature's gently crafting hand. Change isn't always beautiful though. It can be as harsh and unexpected as a blizzard. It comes like a tidal wave on a soft beach and leaves behind a blank slate to write a new chapter upon.

Change has shaped my life from before I can remember. My father was a part of the Air Force and we moved every two to four years. I've lived in many places and visited even more: the United States to Australia, Mexico to South Korea. Each place I've been to have had vastly different cultures and social norms that took time to adjust to. Surprisingly, it's harder to adjust to differences in societies within the United States than if I went to a whole new country. Small differences are somehow harder to reconcile than big ones.

In your novel *North and South*, Margaret Hale moves to a new and vastly different town from the one she grew up in. The distance from Helstone to Milton isn't that great – no oceans or continents are crossed during the journey. But the mentalities of the people are polar opposites, and Margaret, naturally, is unsettled by the change. My moving experience has been much the same. My most recent move was across the United States, from Colorado to South Carolina. It's not the biggest move I've ever made and teenagers are, for the most part, the same everywhere right? Well that assumption was completely wrong. The teens in South Carolina have grown up with the same people their whole lives. They know each other's secrets and have old feuds that they still judge each other on. They know and are comfortable with each other and there's little room for outsiders.

Margaret learns the ways of Milton slowly but surely, and finds a place in the industrial society. She learns to change her idealistic views of her childhood home and how to handle hard, Northern ways. She makes wonderful friends and finds a man she can love. Margaret overcomes her situation and betters herself through the struggle.

I strive to be like Margaret every day. I've lived in South Carolina for a year and a half now and I'm still trying to find my place. I'm just now discovering people who I think will make good and trustworthy friends. I still miss my life and friends in Colorado, but I'm beginning to accept my new position as a long-distance friend. My considerable shyness, which Margaret was

luckily never afflicted with, is slowly starting to abate, and maybe by the time I leave high school I won't have any problems with timidity.

Like the autumn, I'm changing from the girl I was in Colorado. I'm turning new shades of orange, red and yellow, and dancing in the chilly wind with a few other colorful leaves. When it's my turn to let go of my old ways, I'll sink down into the earth. My former self will become the foundation and fertilizer for a new self that will rise up with the spring. Change isn't always good, but it can be. Thank you for sharing Margaret's story with the world. She helps me gather my courage and carry on until I come to that long awaited spring.

Sincerely,

Kristyn Robinson

Dear J.K. Rowling,

Everyone knows that books can change how you look at things at the present, but can they alter how you look at things in the past? In my case I would say yes. I read the first *Harry Potter*, and it changed how I felt about my past and about my future.

When I was around six, I went to live with my mother. I lived with her for three long dreadful years. I hated being there, and I was frequently reminded why I hated it. She was intolerant of anything abnormal, and hated anything she couldn't understand. I loved reading anything I could get my hands on. I especially liked challenging books, but most of the challenging books were in some way controversial to her. I could not read them, or even mention them in any way. I would always secretly wish that she was not prejudiced, and I would be allowed to read books more challenging than *The Cat in the Hat* and *Junie B. Jones*.

At my old school, parents were required to sign a form before a student could check out certain books. I brought the form home to my mother, knowing that she would never sign it. Against my better judgment, I handed the form to her. When she read the form she got extremely angry at me for even suggesting it. She sent me to my room and told me I could not come out for the rest of the day. She liked having control of every aspect of my life. She said it was because "she was saving me." I didn't really know what she was talking about, so I went along with her what she said to keep the peace.

My mother had never even read *Harry Potter*. Her friends told her that the books were "against the bible, and if she read them she would go to hell." She would constantly quote these words to me. Every time anything even closely related to witches came on television she would say those words. I came to believe my mother said was true. I wouldn't even go in the same room as a *Harry Potter* book or anything even close to it. I was extremely afraid of controversial books, especially any related to Harry Potter. It might seem silly to you, but if you were a kid and your mother fed you lies, would you believe them? Would you believe them even if deep down you knew they were false? Your mother is supposed to tell you what they think is right or wrong, but my mother told me what everyone else thought was right or wrong.

I went to live with my dad and his wife when I was nine. They had already read the *Harry Potter* books and recommended them to me. I was extremely weary at first. Every time I picked up the book my mother's voice came in my head and said "If you read that book you will go to hell!" I tried to ignore it, but I just could not shake off the thought that maybe she was right. Maybe I shouldn't read it. Maybe I should just put it down, and walk away. I listened to that voice for a long time, but one day I finally got up the courage not to listen to that terrible voice and started reading the book. After the first couple of chapters I could not put *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* down. I stayed up all night reading it.

I was exceedingly surprised at myself for even touching the book never the less for reading it. For a few long days after that I was terrified of what was going to happen next. I thought I was going to go to hell for what I had accomplished. I had really liked the book, so I read the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. It was even better than the first, and I devoured it in only two days. At long last, I came to the independent conclusion that my mother was completely and utterly wrong.

At the present, I have read every book related to the *Harry Potter* books and all of the *Harry Potter Series*. I have watched all the movies. I loved them all a great deal, and they have changed how I look at other books. I now know that it is okay to for a book to be different. I just wish more people would come to the realization that you don't have to hate something just because you are not familiar with it.

Sincerely,
Kelly S. Ellis

Dear Susan Richards,

A teacher recommended your novel to me after learning that I'm an avid rider. I was slightly skeptical at first, as the majority of horsey books are made up of ignorant blunders that are sure to make any true equestrian's skin crawl. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that your novel was not only genuine and error-free, but contained many similarities to my own life.

Like you, I underwent emotional abuse as a child, and it has affected me in more ways than I'd like to admit. But the barn has always been my sanctuary, and at some points, my sole reason to live. I know that riding could soothe any ache I have, no matter how severe. I might not have any control over what is happening in my life, but I do have control of a thousand pounds of pure strength. And that power is all mine.

Harnessed together, the mind of a human and the athletic ability of a horse create something unstoppable that no common person can understand. It creates a little corner of solace in an otherwise reeling mind, providing peace even if there isn't a horse present. Just knowing that the power is there is enough. Horses shape their human's lives in every aspect, and they exhibit qualities that every human strives to have.

It is amazing what can be learned from damaged horses. As you experienced with Lay Me Down, horses still know how to love even when treated horribly. Those of a scientific mind frequently state that humans anthropomorphize animals too much, and there isn't any scientific evidence to show that animals can love. I don't think these scientists have ever allowed themselves to see that there is, in fact, plentiful evidence of an animal's unlimited abilities to love. Anyone whose life has been touched by special animals, such as Lay Me Down, can justify this.

My current horse, Markus, has shown me his ability to love. Like Lay Me Down, Marky is an ex-racehorse. He was damaged psychologically and physically by the grooms at the track, shown by his scars and initial wariness of strangers. But despite his worries, he is never aggressive or angry. He loves freely and gives everyone a chance, even though he has many reasons not to. As you and I both know, a damaged past can cause a person to lose all abilities to love and trust. It is safer to be hostile, to drive people away, than to risk being hurt again. But hostility drives away the chance at being happy again. Animals show us that it is okay to forgive, and to allow ourselves to find satisfaction with the world.

Horses have given me a chance to live. Without Marky, and the lessons he taught me about love and forgiveness, I would be an empty, depressed person. Your book helped me to realize exactly what this exceptional creature has done for me, and the other potential lessons I can learn from him.

Thank you for your time.

Madeleine Giess

2011-2012 Judges

Jenny Dilworth *Children's Librarian,
Richland County Public Library*

Scott Straun *Children's Librarian,
Beaufort County Library*

Dinah Johnson *Children's Author
and USC Professor*

Denise Lyons *Director of Library
Development Services, SC State Library*

Joyce Hansen *Children's Author*

Kristen Setzler Simensen *Director,
Calhoun County Library*

TJ Wallace *Grants and Program Officer,
The Humanities Council^{SC}*

David Goble *Director,
SC State Library*

Cristi Wilson *Librarian,
Kershaw County Library*

About ReadSC.org

The South Carolina Center for the Book

The South Carolina Center for the Book is the South Carolina Affiliate of the Library of Congress Center for the Book and is a cooperative project of the South Carolina State Library, the University of South Carolina School of Library and Information Science, and the Humanities Council SC. The Center is located at 1430 Senate, Columbia, SC.

The South Carolina Center for the Book celebrates South Carolina's rich literary heritage and brings public attention to the importance of books, writers and reading.

The South Carolina Center for the Book envisions a state where there is a community focus on the joy and value of reading.



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